

# A Writer's Journey

By Lonnie Whitaker

From an early age, I had an intuitive notion that I could write, but college convinced me that English majors and journalism school graduates had esoteric skills I did not possess. Twenty-five years ago, that notion changed when I read a magazine article about a boy's experience playing in a haybarn. I thought I could write an article like that.

I submitted a story to *Missouri Life* magazine about an Ozark memory from my childhood and, to my surprise, they accepted it and actually paid me for it. No doubt, it involved a bit of beginner's luck. Over-the-transom queries often result in form rejection letters or end up in the 'slush pile'. Nevertheless, it is an example of one of my favorite expressions: The Universe rewards movement. Today, the article and a copy of the check hang in my office.



**Standing in front of the Chicken Soup display, Lonnie holds a copy of the volume with his article about learning to play the banjo.**



Courtesy Photos.

**Promoting his children's book series about a rescued tomcat named Mulligan, Lonnie stands next to a Mulligan cutout display.**

Working with the magazine editor convinced me I had much to learn about the craft of writing. Long pretty sentences laced with modifiers that I learned in high school needed to be replaced with strong nouns and active verbs. Certainly, the notorious tautology of legal writing I picked up in law school needed to be tossed. Armed with my one publication credit, I traveled 300 miles to a writers' conference at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind. I registered for a 30-minute session with Karl Largent, a techno-thriller author on the workshop faculty. He read my article, and his response changed my life as a writer. He said, "Writers write. Authors get published, You, my friend, are an author."

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Then, he gave me a writing tip I still use. “Never have your protagonist running quickly, when he could be *sprinting*.” He concluded our meeting by saying, “You know how to write. The question is what are you going to do with it?” His feedback was rocket fuel.

Before the proliferation of journalism schools, aspiring newspaper writers apprenticed and used pivotal words like those in Rudyard Kipling’s poem, “I Keep Six Honest Serving Men”: what, why, when, how, where, and who. My apprenticeship involved contests, conferences, submissions, and rejections. Additionally, I took classes at St. Louis Writers’ Workshop taught by MFAs, including John Dalton, the present Director of the MFA in Creative Writing program at the University of Missouri—St. Louis.

After the publication of several magazine articles, a writing instructor challenged me to write a novel. With a time-consuming day job, it would be five years before I finished the manuscript and found a publisher for my first novel, *Geese to a Poor Market*, which won the Ozark Writers’ League Best Book of the Year award. Nationally-syndicated host Jim Bohannon of Westwood One Radio described it as a “batch of literary white lightning.”

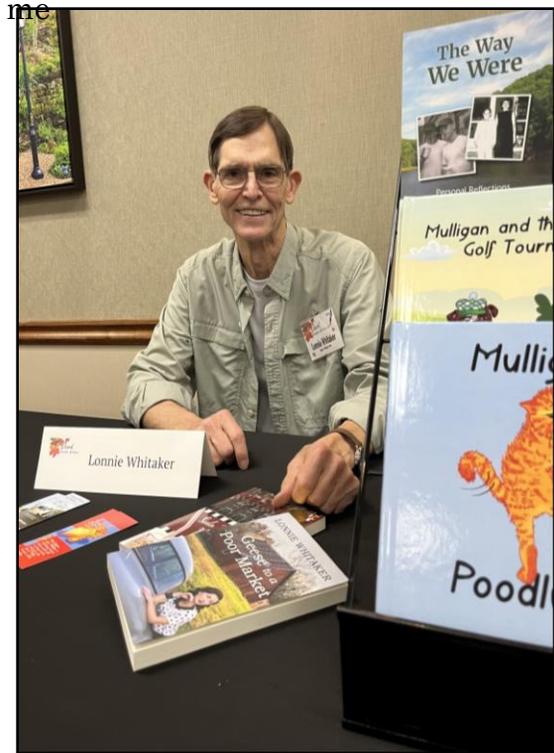
My second novel, *Soda Fountain Blues*, a coming-of-age story set in Yellowstone Park, also won the Ozark Writers League Best Book award. In his blog, Rickey Pittman said, “One of the best young adult novels I’ve ever read . . . Once I started reading, I did not want to stop.”

Even a modicum of success in writing often results from networking. A workshop facilitator, who was the editor of a literary fiction anthology, invited me to be an associate editor. Reviewing the submissions of other writers opened my eyes to different styles and methods of writing.

The publisher of my original novel asked me to join the staff as a part time acquisition editor. Shepherding novels of other writers to publication gave me a sense of satisfaction and an understanding that a rejection may not mean the writing was poor.

As I attended conferences, hawking my novel, I noticed other writers’ tables were covered with children’s picture books. My table seemed bare by comparison. Since it would be a few years before I completed my next novel, it occurred to me I could write a children’s book in the interim. I thought writing a children’s book ought to be easy, but smugness is a precarious perch, and the road to publication proved to be a winding one.

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Courtesy Photo.

**Lonnie seated at his book table at this year's Ozark Creative Writers' Conference in Eureka Springs, Ark.**

I sketched a storyline about a rescued tomcat and his adventures with two poodle puppies, which he called Poodlums. Again, through luck and networking, at the Ozark Creative Writers' Conference in Arkansas, I found a publisher from Maine. *Mulligan Meets the Poodlums* became a published reality and received over 50 Amazon five-star reviews. My initial motivation to fill the gap between novels spawned an award-winning series. The fourth book, *Mulligan Goes to Mars*, will be published in early 2025.

At the same conference a few years later, an editor for Five Star Publishing, a company specializing in Western literature, invited me to submit stories for two anthologies. My submissions were published in the 2018 and 2019 anthologies, *Trading Post* and *Hobnail*.

To outline or not is a fundamental issue among even best-selling fiction authors. Ken Follet is a detailed outliner. Stephen King favors spontaneous writing over a rigid plot outline. A Canadian fiction author I met at the Writers Colony at Dairy Hollow told me, with some energy, that outlining would take all the fun out of it.

I am not an outliner. My outlines are battle plans with symbols and diagrams scribbled on napkins or scraps of paper that will take me through a scene or several chapters. The creative process or, I believe, my Muse will fill in the blanks—too much structure can be confining for her.

Ideas come to me at any time. For example, I was on my exercise bike and looked outside at the red buds of an azalea bush just about to open and thought *little hearts opening to God*. That phrase became the title of a chapter in *Geese to a Poor Market* and was uttered by one of the characters.

It's how I imagine the creative process of potters might work. They start out with a lump of clay intending to make a vase, but the humidity, temperature, and their instincts dictate that the lump become a coffee cup—a really fine coffee cup—that would not have happened if they had rigidly insisted on the clay being a vase.

I make notes of my ideas whenever they occur—anytime, anyplace. Otherwise, I might not remember the thought exactly that same way. When I wait to jot them down later, I always wonder if I got it just the way that had seemed so perfect.

Since September 2019, I have written a biweekly newspaper column, *The Way We Were—Personal Reflections on Life in the Ozarks*, for the *Howell County News*, a southern Missouri print and online weekly newspaper, with over 2,000 subscribers.



Courtesy Photo.

Lonnie speaking at a writers' conference about book marketing.

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Since September 2019, I have written a biweekly newspaper column, *The Way We Were*—Personal Reflections on Life in the Ozarks, for the *Howell County News*, a southern Missouri print and online weekly newspaper, with over 2,000 subscribers. The articles recall an era when one-room schools still populated the hills and small-town teenagers in cars equipped with AM radios and stick shifts cruised Main Street after homecoming games.

Each year, I have submitted an article to the annual Missouri Writers' Guild contest in the Best Newspaper Article category sponsored by the Missouri Press Association. The articles have won third-place, second-place, and the last two years have won first-place.

I have written over 100 newspaper columns, and in 2023 I published the first 50 stories as a book, using the same title as the column. *Missouri Life* magazine reviewed it and said, "The easy-to-read remembrances will delight not only other Ozarkers but also others interested in Missouri in the 1950s and '60s." The second volume, with another 50 articles, will be published in early 2025.

The literary trail is littered with partial manuscripts and scribbled thoughts of would-be authors. Those who made it to the trail's end, or even to the next watering hole, didn't arrive without assistance. My boosters are too numerous to list, but one from the Ozarks warrants mentioning.

In 1998, a judge from western Missouri mailed me two books his mother, Chloe M. Briggs, had written. The first book was printed in 1983 and the second in 1991. The first wasn't typeset, the paragraphs didn't have proper breaks, and the dialogue was written in regional dialect. I became an insufferable, beady-eyed-editor mentally wielding a red pen as I read.

Forty pages later, however, she described the remorse a man felt after beating a horse, with such poignancy, that my heart sank as I read it. My haughtiness faded, and she had me hooked. I finished both books. I told the judge that with the luxury of an agent and editor, his mother's work could have been an Ozark equivalent of Charles Frazier's historical novel, *Cold Mountain*.

Here's the kicker. Mrs. Briggs finished her first book when she was 80 and her second book at 90—in a nursing home. Not long before she passed away, she lamented to her son, "If only I had known what I could do." When I recall those words, in my mind's eye, I see the book cover photograph of gray-haired Mrs. Briggs sitting in front of her vintage IBM Selectric. The image reminds me, like techno-thriller author Karl Largent's challenge, that the Universe rewards movement not procrastination.

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